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[See table of contents](#)

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That “Bossy Shield”: Money, Sex, Sentiment, and the Thimble

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Many years ago now, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich suggested that the key to understanding the early modern woman’s labouring and social life was the pocket. The items it contained, she argued, “would shift from day to day and from year to year, but they would of necessity be small, easily lost, yet precious.”¹ More recently, Ariane Fennetaux has discussed women’s pockets as a space in which eighteenth-century women experienced privacy and materially negotiated the complex issues of interiority.² Little work, however, has been done on the specific contents of women’s pockets and how these individual items might have reflected the social and labouring life of individuals, or have participated in the construction of the affective world and sense of self. This essay will focus on one of the most common objects women carried in the eighteenth century: the thimble. As a point of departure, let us consider the following casualty notice published in the *St. James’s Chronicle* in January 1767:

On Monday Evening a poor Woman with little Boy in her Hand, and another on her Back, travelling from Salisbury to Blandford; and mistaking her Way in the Heaviness of the Snow, as is supposed, perished with

Many thanks to the anonymous *Lumen* readers for their helpful feedback on this essay. Special thanks also to my colleague Maria Zytaruk for her generous and thoughtful attention to this project from its earliest days. She deserves a gold thimble.

1. *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650–1750* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 34.

2. Ariane Fennetaux, “Women’s Pockets and the Construction of Privacy in the Long Eighteenth Century,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 20.3 (2008): 307–34.

her two miserable Infants, and was discovered by a Shepherd's Dog covered over with Snow very early the next Morning. She had Three Farthings in her Pocket, a Bit of Bread and Cheese, and a rusty Thimble."³

Positioned within a miscellaneous column of London news, the account of the dead trio seems designed to elicit the finer emotions of sympathy in newspaper readers. The account of maternal fortitude juxtaposed with pitiable details such as the youth of the victims, the deadly cold, and the paltry contents of the woman's pocket create a quintessential tableau of poverty for the reader and a "position," as Lynn Festa might argue, "from which to enjoy the image of the suffering object in comfort."⁴ It would be a mistake, however, to view this report solely as an affective foray into the sentimental. Whether or not we can verify the particulars of the woman and children's demise, the notice is presented as 'news' and the now expansive work on eighteenth-century poverty substantiates the veracity of the woman's experience in its broadest contours.⁵

What interests me, here, is the extent to which the perceived sentimentality of this passage is constructed and, specifically, how it turns on that rusty thimble which so evocatively ends the casualty notice. As this paper will demonstrate, the thimble was a ubiquitous object in the eighteenth century and one, like the pocket itself, which women owned across all ranks.⁶ Certainly, it was an object implicated daily in women's work and finances and there is compelling evidence that thimbles figured in women's accounting of personal property. The thimble was also associated with the construction of gender identity,

3. *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 15–17 January 1767, 17th–18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers.

4. Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 175.

5. For a general overview on the female poor, see Alannah Tomkins, "Women and Poverty," in *Women's History: Britain, 1700–1850*, ed. Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (London: Routledge, 2005), 152–73. Bridget Hill's work outlines the particularly precarious position of single women and widows; see her chapter, "The Poor Spinster and the Poor Law," in *Women Alone: Spinsters in England 1660–1850* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 94–105. On the migratory poor, see Tim Hitchcock, *Down and Out in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007). Cf. the account of Ann Yeats, Hitchcock, 144–47.

6. Fennetaux identifies the "triviality" of the pocket as one of its most useful attributes in studying how women of all ranks constructed privacy in this period, Fennetaux, 310.

social relationships, and memory. In this essay, I aim to recover the forgotten associations of the thimble with the lives of everyday eighteenth-century women and to recover the physical and sentimental attachments that women forged with these small objects. This paper seeks to restore the material and emotional shorthand of the common thimble as it was embodied in the quotidian practices of the period and in their literary representations. In its methods and focus, this essay builds on the work of Mary Beaudry, whose recent writing on the thimble provides a model for recuperating a history of the object through combined documentary and material evidence.⁷ For my understanding of the affective ties between people and objects, particularly in the increasingly commercial world of the eighteenth century, the scholarship of Amanda Vickery, Maxine Berg, and Lorna Weatherill has served as a foundation.⁸ In thinking about how these bonds were articulated in period literature, the work of Deidre Lynch and Lynn Festa has also been crucial, especially with regard to how the circulation of objects and sentiment was often intimately entangled in the imaginative domain.⁹

* * *

The thimble itself has a small, but devoted following among collectors and needlework historians. However, the focus of their interest has largely been on the design and fabrication history of the thimble

7. Mary Beaudry, *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

8. Amanda Vickery, “Women and the World of Goods: A Lancashire Consumer and her Possessions 1751–81,” in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 274–301; Maxine Berg, “Women’s Consumption and the Industrial Classes of Eighteenth-Century England,” *Journal of Social History* 30.2 (1996): 415–34 and *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Lorna Weatherill, “A Possession of One’s Own: Women and Consumer Behavior in England, 1660–1740,” *The Journal of British Studies* 25.2 (1986): 131–56 and *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660–1760*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1996).

9. Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) and “Personal Effects and Sentimental Fictions,” in *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Mark Blackwell (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), 63–91; Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire* and “The Moral Ends of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Object Narratives,” *The Secret Life of Things*, 309–28.

with an eye towards connoisseurship and collecting.¹⁰ On the whole, their accounts of the thimble have not typically focused on the emotive relationship between these objects and their owners, nor have they shown much interest in such humble specimens as that rusty thimble above. Mary Beaudry, alone, has brought scholarly attention to what she terms “the ubiquitous and occasionally ordinary thimble.”¹¹ Central to her *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing*, is the notion that “small finds,” such as women’s needlework tools, convey not only information about everyday practices of the past, but complex information about social



Eighteenth-century silver thimble. © Trustees of the British Museum

identity. Reconstructing the material and sentimental contexts of these objects, for Beaudry, entails recapturing “the multiplicity of meanings” these small objects carried.¹² Beaudry’s attention to the thimble, however, is the exception. For the most part, the thimble has been ignored in the growing history of consumer goods in the eighteenth century. They are the quintessential example of what Sara Pennell has named “the small things forgotten” of women’s experience. As she points out, material culture historians have preferentially studied those objects whose aggregate numbers support more sweeping generalizations about market trends or, alternatively, those elite items whose survival contributes to ongoing discussions around consumption and the luxury marketplace. More generally, she insists, scholars have overlooked those items that are small, of little value, and associated with the mundane activities of female domestic life.¹³ Despite being

10. See Edwin F. Holmes, *A History of Thimbles* (New York, London, and Toronto: Cornwall Books, 1985); Gay Ann Rogers, *An Illustrated History of Needlework Tools* (London: John Murray, 1983) and *American Silver Thimbles* (London: Haggerston Press, 1989).

11. The title of her fourth chapter, Beaudry, *Findings*, 86–114.

12. Beaudry, 1–7.

13. Sara Pennell, “Mundane Materiality, or, Should Small Things Still be Forgotten?: Material Culture, Micro-Histories and the Problem of Scale,” in *History and Material Culture: A Student’s Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, ed.

precisely the kind of inexpensive, decorative metal goods that women habitually purchased in the period, thimbles make no appearance, for instance, in Maxine Berg's otherwise comprehensive overview of the eighteenth-century toy and trinket trade.¹⁴

And yet, as I have stated, thimbles were ubiquitous in the period. Consider the following figures: in just one month in 1692, the Custom House of London received 151,000 imported thimbles.¹⁵ In 1695, Dutch émigré John Lofting was probably producing domestically close to 2,000,000 thimbles annually with a newly patented horse-powered machine.¹⁶ While most commonly associated with needlework, thimbles were tools with a broad range of applications. Thimbles were regularly employed in the kitchen, for instance, as measures for recipes and in shaping rolled confectionaries. Those charged with pharmaceutical preparations in the household likewise used the thimble as a standard measure (even as thimbles varied in shape and size across the decades). References abound also to the common practice of using the impression of a thimble to seal a letter.¹⁷ What these alternate uses of the thimble confirm is that thimbles were multi-functional objects, continually at hand for women in the period. In William Congreve's

Karen Harvey (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 176–80. Proving her point about the discounting of women's goods, her discussion of the mechanization of thimble production in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries brings into focus an industry that has been largely overlooked by historians despite its substantial scale and technological innovation. See, "Material Culture in Seventeenth-Century 'Britain': The Matter of Domestic Consumption," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 76–78.

14. See her chapter "Metal Things: Useful Devices and Agreeable Trinkets," *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 154–92.

15. "Goods Imported to, and Exported from the Custom-House of London, from the 14th of May, to the 11th of June, 1692," *Collection for Improvement of Husbandry and Trade*, 25 June 1692, *Burney Collection*.

16. Pennell, "Material Culture in Seventeenth-Century 'Britain,'" 77.

17. E.g. a recipe for a "good seed cake" calls for thimblefull of caraway seeds: Peregrine Montague, *The family pocket-book* (London, [1760?]), 159; for the shaping of perfumed pastilles with a thimble, see Mary Eales, *Mrs. Mary Eales's receipts* (London, 1767), 100; Mary Kettily suggests a preparation of hemlock, one "Thimble full of Bay Salt" and Bole Armoniac, applied to the wrists, for an affliction of the eyes: *A collection of above three hundred receipts in cookery, physick and surgery* (London, 1719), 60; the *London Daily Advertiser*, 19 January 1753, *Burney Collection*, makes reference to the practice of women sealing a *billet doux* with "the Impression of a Thimble." On the association of thimbles and letter writing, see also Holmes, 41.

Way of the World (1770), Lady Wishfort, for example, complaining of the small size of her liquor cup, upbraids her servant Peg in the following way: “Does thou take me for a fairy, to drink out of an acorn? Why didst thou not bring thy thimble? Hast thou ne’er a brass thimble clinking in thy pocket with a bit of nutmeg?”¹⁸

Curiously, despite the volume of thimbles circulating in the period and their universal utility for women, they were not the sort of objects to be registered in formal inventories of property. Undoubtedly, they were considered too materially insignificant to make an appearance in the probate inventories, for instance, studied by Lorna Weatherill. Instead, it is likely they might have been precisely the kind of items that escaped inventory when family members clustered and concealed household goods “so that things of low value could be hidden away and overlooked as ‘lumber’ or just discounted.”¹⁹ Even among the pauper inventories studied by Peter King, where one might expect that even small items would be precious, thimbles make no appearance. Here, again, they were either hidden away to avoid inventory or considered beneath accounting.²⁰

If we return briefly to that rusty thimble from the start, though, we see hints of a relative valuation of thimbles that runs contrary to these more formal indications of their inconsequence. The presence of that rusty thimble in the poor woman’s pocket as her sole identifying possession and perhaps the sole moveable good that she elected to carry, speaks to the singular utility and, perhaps ironically, its particular value to this woman. The most obvious conclusion one can draw from the presence of the thimble is that this woman employed it regularly in sewing tasks, and that the thimble’s use value far exceeded its negligible market value. Tim Hitchcock, for one, has chronicled the challenges the poor faced in keeping together a clean and presentable set

18. William Congreve, *Way of the World*, ed. Richard Kroll, *Broadview Anthology of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Drama: Concise Edition*, ed. J. Douglas Canfield (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2003) 3,29–32.

19. Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*, 203–4.

20. Peter King, “Pauper Inventories and the Material Lives of the Poor in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries,” in *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor*, ed. Tim Hitchcock, Peter King, and Pamela Sharpe (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 155–91.

of clothes, often constructed of rags and remnants.²¹ It is possible, also, that the presence of the thimble indicates the woman's potential involvement in the needle trades. The second largest occupation of London women in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries after domestic service was "making and mending clothes" and women often turned to this work as they entered the childbearing years and were excluded from domestic labour.²² However, even as that thimble indicates earning potential, its condition speaks of the limited scope of that potential. Although it is impossible to discern from the description whether the woman's thimble was fabricated from steel, brass, or silver (the most common varieties of working thimbles at this period), the reference to the corroded state indicates that the woman would have been excluded from all but the meanest of sewing tasks. Moreover, her apparent inability to replace the rusty thimble speaks to her slim resources. A brass thimble at this period, probably the variety most common to women of this station, was valued anywhere from a half-penny to a penny.²³ A silver thimble was probably entirely out of reach for this woman, costing between six pennies and a shilling.²⁴ The three farthings in her pocket may have just funded a new brass thimble, but the purchase would have exhausted all her ready funds.

Some of the richest sources attesting to the ubiquity of thimbles and their material significance to women are found in the records of the Old Bailey. Pocket picking crimes and other theft records provide an illuminating view of what women typically carried on their bodies and what constituted personal property for them. Alongside coins, nutmeg graters, silvers spoons, and iron keys, thimbles appear with

21. See his chapter, "The Rhetoric of Rags," especially 97–106 for a description of the "ragged class," *Down and Out*.

22. Peter Earle, "The Female Labour Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," in *Women's Work: The English Experience 1650–1914*, ed. Pamela Sharpe (London: Arnold, 1998), 133.

23. In court records, the theft of 432 brass thimbles with steel tops was valued at three pounds, *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 6.0, 17 April 2011), 15 September 1784, trial of William Smith (t1784o0915–6). See also *OBP*, 16 January 1684, trial of Charles Dillan (t1684o116–21); *OBP*, 21 February 1753, trial of Grace Weedon and Isabella Roe (t1753o221–51); and *OBP*, 18 September, 1765, trial of Lawrence Neal (t1765o0918–30).

24. Theft records again provide a good indication of the retail cost of silver thimbles: a typical record indicates that Anne Samuel stole a silver thimble worth ten pennies, *OBP*, 10 September 1755, trial of Anne Samuel (t1755o910–27).

great regularity in the inventories of goods stolen from pockets.²⁵ Thimbles also regularly appear among the inventory of items stolen in violent crime, such as highway robbery, and in general housebreaking. Gold and silver thimbles would have been the most desired takings for thieves as the metal had an intrinsic value and the objects themselves could easily be melted down for resale. In 1734, for instance, Archibald Gregoire testified about a highway robbery between London and Hampstead, when a thief allegedly stole three thimbles from the women in his company. Upon inspection, he reports, the thief returned the brass thimbles and kept only the silver.²⁶ Given the intrinsic value of silver, this makes sense. The purchase price for silver was regularly advertised in newspapers, with a slightly higher price per ounce for small pieces such as “Thimbles, Sleeve Buttons, Toys and Trinkets.”²⁷ Women were certainly conscious of the liquidity of better thimbles and, I would assert, in certain theft situations reported the loss of thimbles not simply on principle but as a tangible blow to monetary stocks. Particularly for the young and poor, whose incomes were reckoned on a smaller scale, thimbles fabricated from precious metals were counted as financial assets. We can observe this fact at work in the children’s story, “The Little Fiddler,” when the young Olivia offers up her gold thimble to relieve a poor boy whose livelihood is put in jeopardy when a less charitably inclined child smashes his fiddle: “Go, run and sell it, little friend; I have an ivory one will serve me full as well.”²⁸ At the other end of the social spectrum, the prostitute Emily in John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill* (1748/49) counts a silver thimble in her humble inventory of goods: “My whole stock was two broad-pieces of my god-mother’s, a few shillings, silver shoe-buckles, and thimble.”²⁹

Although we must use the Old Bailey transcripts of witness testimony with caution, women’s accounts of highway robbery reveal that, even in the case of less valuable brass and steel thimbles, women did

25. Fennetaux also considers the records of pocket picking crimes to establish whether the actual inventories of women’s pockets matched literary descriptions, Fennetaux, 312. Advertisements of lost pockets establish for her the mobility of eighteenth-century women and their life as consumers. See Fennetaux, 315–17.

26. OBP, 30 June 1734, trial of John Wright (t1734o630–27).

27. *St. James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 10–12 May 1764, Burney Collection.

28. Arnaud Berquin, *The children’s friend*, vol. 1 (London, 1786), 139–40.

29. John Cleland, *Memoirs of a woman of pleasure*, vol. 2 (London, 1749), 19.

not typically distinguish thimbles from other material goods, or from money itself, in their inventory of losses. Mary Harrison’s 1735 testimony, for instance, describes her highway assault in these words: “He clap’d a Pistol to my Breast [...] and said, Give me your Money or I’ll shoot ye dead this minute. Honest Friend, says I, You may see by my Dress that I am but a Servant, but I’ll [sic] give you what I have[.] I had an old pair of Gloves, two Brass Thimbles, and three Shillings and six Pence in my Pocket.”³⁰ While it may be true that Mary Harrison simply emptied her pockets when confronted by the robber, the language of the testimony is fairly common. When highwaymen demanded money from women, women regularly handed over their thimbles. On occasion, the language of these interactions reveals a mismatch in the way woman and men valued these objects. Silver and gold thimbles were clearly items with market value, but workaday specimens like the three brass thimbles above probably had relatively greater use value for the woman of the middling to lower ranks than the thief. When the widow Sarah Barker was accosted in Edward More, he also asked her to stand and deliver: “[...] he came to the side of the coach I sat on, and demanded my money. I gave him some; he asked me, if it was all? I told him; it was not; he asked for more, I gave him a thimble, a knife, and some other things; he said, what must he do with that trumpery? and gave it me again; then I gave him all I had.”³¹ Here, the highwayman’s identification of the thimble as trumpery and his return of the offered item, likely indicate that the thimble itself had little material worth for his purposes. Interestingly, however, Barker’s proffering of the object upon the prompting for money suggests a monetizing of the thimble regardless of its cash value. In similar situations, women displayed considerable courage in attempting to retrieve their thimbles from attackers, sometimes even prioritizing them over money. When Thomas Holly robbed Sarah Buscoe at knifepoint in January 1749, for example, he took six pence and a thimble from her pocket. However, when she demanded that he return the thimble, he did.³² In a similar case, the *London Evening Post* ran a news item in December of

30. *OBP*, 2 July 1735, trial of John Wilson (t17350702–6).

31. *OBP*, 5 April 1749, trial of Edward More (t17490405–13). See also *OBP*, 29 April 1778, trial of Abr. Hyams and Joseph Saul (t17780429–9).

32. *OBP*, 22 February 1749, trial of Thomas Holly (t17490222–9).

1751 about two young ladies who were robbed in a post-chaise “by a gay Spark about Twenty” who apparently treated his victims with great civility. He robbed them of their money, but it is reported that when “one of the Ladies courageously ask[ed] for her Thimble, and something to bear her Charges to London, he returned it, and gave the Post-Boy a Shilling.”³³

One of the reasons women valued thimbles, sometimes above their actual material worth, was their association with gift giving in the period. Peddlers, mercers, hardware-men, milliners, haberdashers, and silver and goldsmiths regularly advertised the sale of thimbles in the period and many poems record the purchase of a thimble at a country fair. The rise of toy shops in the eighteenth century also confirms the popularity of gifting thimbles as a decorative object, a keepsake, and token of esteem. These stores often advertised the sale of such novelties as well as related sewing accessories: scissors, needles and thimble cases in an array of shapes and fabrication.³⁴ Thimbles were perfect gifts for a variety of reasons. On the one hand, the availability of inexpensive brass thimbles in a standard range of sizes—girls, maids, and women—is evidence of a woman’s lifelong relationship with the thimble, and the abiding suitability of a thimble as a token or keepsake.³⁵ Coupled with this usefulness was the fact that the increasing availability of thimbles in a variety of designs, price points, and sizes meant that these were objects that could be gifted economically at meaningful life-cycle moments by a range of family members and friends. Maxine Berg’s work on the Birmingham and Sheffield trinket and toy trade sheds light on the expanding market for inexpensive, fashionable novelties particularly for the middling ranks. Capitalizing on technological innovations in metalworking and new metals alloys, these manufacturers supplied a gift marketplace that traded in sentiment.³⁶ Silver items, for instance, could be personalized with monograms or engravings, becoming in bequests “cultural symbols of family connections and bearers of memory.” Even less valuable trinkets, though, Berg

33. *London Evening Post*, 24–26 December 1751, *Burney Collection*.

34. E.g. see the advertisement for pinchbeck trinkets in *George Faulkner the Dublin Journal*, 14–18 January 1746, *Burney Collection*.

35. Holmes, 39.

36. See her chapter “Metal Things,” *Luxury and Pleasure*, 154–92.

suggests may have functioned similarly “to enhance their family and friendship relationships.”³⁷

Although the literature on consumer consumption is largely silent on the purchase and gifting of thimbles, the practice seems to have been widespread and attached, as mentioned, to symbolically significant moments in a woman’s life. For example, *The complete letter-writer* (1767)—which offers “familiar letters on the most common occasions in life”—chronicles the gifting of a gold thimble to a young girl named Amelia. The model letter that accompanies the gift depicts the thimble as a magical token that possesses a “Charm against the Calamities of Poverty.” It will provide the wearer with a decent occupation “without depending on the Beneficence of others.”³⁸ This gold thimble is clearly a gift with an agenda: the letter peddles the conventional rhetoric of maidenly conduct and female industry. But the luxurious fabrication of the thimble itself and the letter’s crafting of its symbolic import signals a gift that was designed to be a substantial, lasting keepsake for a young woman on the verge of adulthood. Although the gifting of gold thimbles was certainly an elite activity,³⁹ the availability of silver thimbles in a variety of designs and with options for personalization meant that thimbles were gifts accessible to the middling classes as well.⁴⁰ The most elaborate of these, dating from the latter half of the eighteenth century, might be filigreed or fitted with novelty items such as perfume bottles or letter seals, but most specimens were more practical and often personalized with initials alone.⁴¹

While, for the young, thimbles were gifts that signaled their emergence into the domestic sphere, in the courting years, thimbles became a common lover’s gift. In a poem entitled “Dorothy and Roger: A Pastoral,” for instance, a thimble becomes a token of future fidelity and even a surrogate wedding band for a hesitant lover: “To the next Fair we’ll both together hie,/ Where for thy Finger I’ll a Thimble buy/ Of purest Silver, be it e’er so dear,/ Which the first Letters of thy Name

37. Berg, “Women’s Consumption,” 427.

38. *The complete letter-writer; or, polite English secretary* (London, 1767), 143–44.

39. A gold thimble, at the start of the century, cost around fifty shillings, Holmes, 87.

40. Better quality gold and silver thimbles were often designed with a blank cartouche for the purposes of monogramming, Holmes, 40.

41. Holmes, 41.

shall bear.”⁴² It is easy to understand how the thimble would become associated with romance and marriage as both its metal construction and residence on the woman’s finger was evocative of the wedding band; but the fittingness of the thimble as a love token must also be associated with its usual habitation in a woman’s pocket. Fennetaux’s discussion of the eighteenth-century pocket is particularly helpful in clarifying this connection. As she explains, not only did the pocket itself inhabit a suggestive proximity to the woman’s body, but the shape—reminiscent of the female genitalia—also fostered the metaphorical connection between a woman’s pocket and her sexuality.⁴³ To give a thimble to a sweetheart was to ensure the lover surrogate access not only sexualized spaces, but to the private spaces of the heart as well. As Fennetaux reminds us, pockets were not only receptacles for the mundane tools of domestic work, but also private spaces for women that might be filled with personal writings, love letters, or keepsakes.⁴⁴ Although her article does not include thimbles among these intimate objects, it is not difficult to imagine how a woman might experience its presence in a pocket as a private pleasure.⁴⁵ Being a utilitarian item as well, the frequent placement and removal of a thimble on the finger would have also functioned to keep the beloved in mind, even as it coyly foreshadowed the more formal and more lasting wedding ring to come. Joseph Addison’s play, *The drummer, or haunted house* (1715), makes this connection explicit. During a comic courting scene between a steward and lady’s maid, the steward makes a present of a silver thimble, and proceeds to place it on the finger of Mrs. Abigail as she feigns confusion and resistance:

Vellum: “You have the prettiest Tip of a Finger—I must take the Freedom to salute it.”

Abigail: “O fye! you make me asham’d, Mr Vellum; how can you do so? I protest I am in such a confusion—[...]Oh, I vow you press it so hard! pray give me my Finger again.”⁴⁶

42. *Compleat Set of St. James’s Journals*, 18 May 1723, *Burney Collection*, 335.

43. Fennetaux, 318, 321.

44. Fennetaux, 322–30.

45. Fennetaux describes the tactile engagement with the pocket keepsake, 330.

46. Joseph Addison, *The drummer; or, the haunted house* (London, 1715) Act 3, 31–32.

Although the playful eroticism of the scene is clear, so are the connections to more honorable relations. The act of placing the thimble on the finger puts Vellum in mind of a wedding ring and he even names the gifted thimble its "Foreunner." The pair, he claims, "will set off each other" as a "twofold Emblem." "The first," he continues, "will put you in mind of being a good Huswife, and the other of being a good Wife."⁴⁷

Vellum's comments are largely tongue-in-cheek, here, but the association of the thimble with domestic skills and household economy made the thimble a token of esteem for accomplished housekeepers as well. Headmaster and poet Samuel Bishop, whose many domestic poems commemorate anniversary gifts to his worthy wife, writes one verse on the occasion of gifting a gold thimble.⁴⁸ The lines anticipate the insult that may arise from presenting a thimble to an already capable and industrious woman; however, in the poet's estimation, the gold fabrication is a commendation rather than a recommendation:

If Thimbles, therefore, types so clear
Of common Industry appear,
A Golden one, of course, may be
A type of Golden Industry;
Of such superior stamp, as still
Yours ever bore, ---- and ever will."⁴⁹

Bishop's poem is a prime example of the kind of hyperbole the thimble attracted in period poems, that often served to rhetorically belie their diminutive size and worth. In the course of the poem, the speaker compares Mary Bishop's new thimble to an illustrious sword, renowned for victories in battle, and suggests her gold thimble (like a hero's sword) will survive to spur other wives to domestic prowess. The lines also equate the quality of Mrs. Bishop's sewing projects with the preciousness of the metal and promote the survival of the gold thimble as

47. Addison, 32.

48. Bishop's "gift" poems are an illuminating window into domestic gifting practices in eighteenth-century households: among the gifts he purchased for his wife are an orange-bergamot snuff box, a paste buckle for a handkerchief, a silver tea pot, an ivory toothpick case, a pocket looking glass, a set of Worcester China, and a gold pocket watch. See, *The poetical works of the Rev. Samuel Bishop*, 2 vols. (London, 1796).

49. Bishop, 75.

an enduring monument to Mrs. Bishop's superior domestic skills even long after her death.⁵⁰

* * *

This paper has established that thimbles were objects whose value was predicated on a variety of conditions, sometimes but not always related to the intrinsic value of the materials. As we see in these cases of women who reportedly confronted robbers in order to retrieve their thimbles, women valued thimbles, sometimes paradoxically so. Even when criminals were willing to discount them, or dismiss their value, women both conceptualized them in financial terms and aggrandized their value. The evidence of gifting thimbles explains, in part, the sentimental value that accrued to these small objects. Thimbles could be attached to milestone events in a woman's life and were tangible reminders of expectation, hopes, and accomplishments. But affective ties between women and their thimbles were also predicated on physical closeness, mutual sympathy, and personal identification. In 1786, Ann Oliver was called on to identify some stolen goods that had gone missing from her house and were now in the possession of her former servant. A silver thimble she was able to identify without hesitation: "It is mine," she swore, "here is my maiden name on the outside of it; I have had it above these twenty years."⁵¹ Oliver's testimony speaks both to the longevity of these items—their durability and long working life—and to women's personal attachments to these objects which were often intimately entwined with memory and identity: in this case to Ann Oliver's unmarried self. Even in cases where thimbles were not personalized with initials or mottoes—or perhaps linked with memorable gifting events—we have evidence that women formed intimacies with these objects, probably through daily use, and knew their shape, their identifying marks, their scratches and dents as well as themselves. It is not uncommon in the court records to come across accusers who are able to identify their stolen thimbles by a monogram, a decorative pattern, a manufacturing mark, or even a distinctive "bruise" on the

50. Bishop, 75–77.

51. *OBP*, 13 December 1786, trial of Mary Adams (t17861213–14).

metal.⁵² As Vickery asserts, even “intrinsically mundane” things for eighteenth-century women could be “rich with memory.”⁵³

The anonymous it-narrative, *The Silver Thimble* (1799), provides literary evidence of the tangle of commercial and affective ties between a woman and her thimble.⁵⁴ Even at the level of genre, the choice of a thimble as the focus of an object narrative suggests the item’s involvement in the material and commercial world of the eighteenth century. Among the rupees, shillings, and bank notes that circulate in this genre, the thimble appears in this text as another transactional object.⁵⁵ First purchased from a peddler by the young Clara Steady, the thimble is selected from among more luxurious specimens for its practical construction. Forgoing thimbles of “silver fillagree, others of highly polished silver, with blue enamelled edges, inlaid with curious mottos,” Clara selects the simple silver thimble with steel top for its durability and, as she says, because steel does not soil thread so frequently as pure silver thimbles.⁵⁶ The fact that Clara’s selection of a thimble demonstrates her good sense and economy is indicative of the moral economy that characterizes this particular novel of circulation. Like many it-narratives of the latter end of the eighteenth century, *The Silver Thimble* is a children’s book that peddles morally instructive vignettes for primarily a young female audience (Clara Steady is ten years old). In imitation of earlier object narratives, the thimble itself passes through various hands throughout the narrative, but the test in this text involves whether these various recipients can recognize and make

52. E.g. see *OBP*, 20 February 1799, trial of Jane Patterson (t17990220–44); *OBP*, 27 February 1760, trial of Sarah Parden, (t17600227–3); and *OBP*, 10 September 1755, trial of Anne Samuel (t17550910–27).

53. Amanda Vickery, “Women and the World of Goods,” 286. The work of Joanne Bailey and Garthine Walker also demonstrates women’s attachment to small household goods, both in terms of property law and theft patterns. See Bailey, “Favoured or Oppressed? Married women, property and ‘coverture’ in England, 1660–1800,” *Continuity and Change* 17.3 (2002): 351–72; and Walker, “Women, Theft, and the World of Stolen Goods,” *Women, Crime, and the Courts in Early Modern England*, ed. Jennifer Kermod and Garthine Walker (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

54. On the problematic attribution of this text, see *British It-Narratives*, ed. Mark Blackwell, vol. 4 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 231.

55. On the link between object narratives and circulation, see Liz Bellamy, “It-Narrators and Circulation: Defining a Subgenre,” in *The Secret Life of Things*, 117–46.

56. *The Silver Thimble* (London, 1799), 10–12.

good use of this object whose real value to industry, neatness, and economy may not be apparent in the humble shape.⁵⁷ For a poor gleaner, Patty Primrose, who finds the thimble in a field after it is dropped by Clara Steady, the silver thimble is an unaccountable stroke of fortune. Never having seen real silver before, she is unable even to identify the metal until a more wordly neighbour compares it to a sixpence.⁵⁸ But for Miss Smallwit, who claims the thimble from Patty Primrose, the thimble is simply a bauble, serviceable only for “rapping the head of poor Pompey, and crushing the harmless insects which came within her reach.”⁵⁹

The eventual return of the silver thimble to Clara Steady provides her not only the satisfaction in the reappearance of a useful object, but a sympathetic reunion between owner and object. When the negligent Miss Smallwit drops the thimble in Clara’s view, Clara is able to identify her old thimble through some markings on the object that constituted her “ineffectual attempt to engrave her name on one side” of the thimble.⁶⁰ On the one hand, we can recognize in Clara’s efforts to monogram her own thimble, not just her youthful desire to have a personalized object, in imitation of fancier thimbles perhaps, but also a proprietary sentiment towards the object. Not unlike the women above who resisted the seizing of their own thimbles, Clara here claims ownership of this object and wonders how any one “could be so mercenary as to wish to retain what they knew was not their own.”⁶¹ However, Clara’s identification of her marked thimble is also a kind of self-recognition. Fit was extremely important in the selection of a thimble and silver thimbles were regularly offered in a variety of sizes or custom fitted.⁶² Before she purchases the thimble from the peddler, Clara tries on variety of sizes until she finds the perfect one.⁶³ Clara’s thimble, as both witness of and participant in her industry and moderation, constitutes her perfect match, her custom fit. Clara Steady, in fact, keeps her cherished silver thimble in a box full of trinkets even after it develops

57. On it-narratives for children, see Bellamy, 131–33.

58. *The Silver Thimble*, 88–89.

59. *The Silver Thimble*, 95.

60. *The Silver Thimble*, 103.

61. *The Silver Thimble*, 103.

62. Holmes, 39.

63. *The Silver Thimble*, 12.

three or four holes. When asked by friends why she would preserve something “not worth a farthing,” Clara points to an old horse in her papa’s field and indicates that we often preserve things long past their use to honour those who first provided the gift, and to commemorate the years of service, pleasure, and utility that the object has provided the recipient.⁶⁴ It serves for Clara, also, as a tangible reminder of her moral character: who she was and who she continues to be.

Lynch’s and Festa’s work on the appearance and function of objects in sentimental texts illuminates the affective ties between people and their possessions. I would argue that we witness these same ties between women and their thimbles. Although the records of the Old Bailey or the casualty report at the start of this essay are not texts with the same self-conscious art as those produced by sentimental writers such as Laurence Sterne or Henry Mackenzie, these texts along with *The Silver Thimble* provide evidence of what Lynch calls “sentimental possession,” which “personalizes and decommodifies property by detaching it from the marketplace’s system of objects.”⁶⁵ Those thimbles, discarded as trumpery and dismissed as junk by thieves or negligently dropped from the pocket of Miss Smallwit, and yet retaining for their female owners a distinct value, express precisely this affective operation of the sentimental. Clara’s enshrining of her damaged thimble in a “beautiful little box” and her claim that “as a rembrancer it is just as valuable as any other trifle in the box” signals a separate system of valuation for sentimental objects.⁶⁶ As a genre, the it-narrative, Festa argues, regularly commutes the economic value of objects into “objective correlatives of interior emotions and personal experiences.”⁶⁷ Likewise, outside of the fictional world, she argues, sentimental possession grants objects a “singularity that defies the commodity form.”⁶⁸

Such objects as thimbles, especially with their capacity for personalization, the familiarity from daily use, and their association with life-cycle gifting are natural receptacles of sentiment. Certainly, the trinket industry of the eighteenth century counted on this market for feeling. Moreover, women confronting thieves for the return of their

64. *The Silver Thimble*, 111–12.

65. Lynch, *Economy of Character*, 117–18.

66. *The Silver Thimble*, 111–12.

67. Festa, *Sentimental Figures*, 118.

68. Festa, *Sentimental Figures*, 69.

thimbles, identifying their thimbles in court from the markings of use, Clara keeping her damaged thimble in a box of keepsakes, and even perhaps the dead woman at the opening of this essay retaining a rusty thimble whose use may have been limited, suggest that women had strong affective ties to these small objects even when their commercial value was negligible. And, crucially, women had affective ties not to *a* thimble, but to *their* thimble, marked with their initials, scratched or dented through use, or gifted to them alone. Festa writes, also, that what distinguishes the sentimental object is its relationship with its owner. This relationship is what makes these objects “exempt from exchange” and valuable only to one.⁶⁹ The return of Clara’s thimble to its rightful owner at the end of the *Silver Thimble* thus confirms the singular relationship between *this* girl and *this* thimble, but also the existence of this relationship distinct from marketplace valuations. The large number of it-narratives written for children in the last couple of decades of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth often follow this pattern of circulation and return Festa shows. Objects return to the children who love them and who were solicitous in their care. The endings of these stories thus function to validate affective worth by removing the cherished object from circulation and “creating a refuge from the vast engines that run economies of the world.”⁷⁰

* * *

At the end of *The Silver Thimble*, the thimble itself declares its satisfaction at being returned to Clara Steady: “Suffice it to say,” it says, “that I am still honoured with a place in the pocket of my mistress.”⁷¹ The advantage of a talking object is that it can declare the reciprocal intimacy it feels with its owner.⁷² As a book with a moralizing program directed specifically at girls, however, it should be noted that the relationship between Clara and her thimble is constructed as mutually beneficial yet morally chaste. When Clara’s thimble is returned, she slides it on her finger and declares, “[s]he should work now with double

69. Festa, *Sentimental Figures*, 74.

70. Festa, “The Moral Ends,” 325.

71. *The Silver Thimble*, 110.

72. Festa supplies us with this model of object/owner reciprocity, *Sentimental Fictions*, 121.

pleasure."⁷³ Elsewhere in period literature, however, the familiarity, companionship, and intimacy between a woman and her thimble provides occasion for more amorous speculation and, occasionally, male anxiety. By virtue of their proximal intimacy to women's bodies and their functional role in protecting women's fingers from pricks of the needle, thimbles are often implicated in complex ways in poetical negotiations of the female heart and body. Lines "Written Extempore on Myra's Thimble" from *The Ladies Journal* (1727) are typical in this respect. The speaker addresses the thimble itself, that "pritty, little, precious Thing," which has strayed unaccountably from Myra's finger.⁷⁴ The language of the poem expresses an illicit pleasure in the company of the thimble, originating from its intimate knowledge of Myra's body: "Like Stolen joys which sweetest be,/ Thy Presence Charms and Pleasures me."⁷⁵ However, while enjoying the company of the thimble, the speaker enjoins it to return to its owner:

But ah! while thus you loiter here,
Her Finger wants thy Aid I fear;
Perhaps the little pointed Steel,
Now makes her bitter Anguish feel;
And her bright Eyes in Tears are drown'd,
While her dear Blood o'er flows the Wound;
Fly then thou Guardian Thimble Fly;
Preserve her Blood least Myra dye.⁷⁶

The kind of poetic hyperbole in this poem attached to potential wounds of needles and the protective functions of the thimble is obviously about sex and the containment of female virtue. And one sees this type of rhetoric not infrequently in the very minor subgenre of thimble poems.

For instance, William Hawkins's heroi-comical poem, *The Thimble* (1744), also participates in this poetic association between the thimble and virtue. In large part an imitation of Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, Hawkins's poem features the fickle, vain, and resolutely single Fannia who is something of a virtuoso needlewoman and not a little reckless with the sewing tools: "Fannia [...] wast wont to wield/The pointed

73. *The Silver Thimble*, 110.

74. *The Ladies Journal* (Dublin, 1727), 64.

75. *Ibid.*

76. *Ibid.*

Spear, without the bossy Shield!”⁷⁷ As one might expect of someone so rash and so single, Fannia ends up “goring” her finger in Canto II, sending up lamentations worthy of Belinda.⁷⁸ The only remedy for the bloodshed is to provide Fannia with a husband and a thimble. The former involves the intercession of Venus (and a second pricking, this time by Cupid’s dart); the latter entails a descent to Vulcan’s cave where Venus is able to secure “a little Target” to “shield the Finger from the Needle’s Dart.”⁷⁹ The resulting thimble is designed by Vulcan to ensure that Fannia can continue her needlework—that is, after all, the province of all women—but do so in the context of home and family, and not as an expression of imaginative, or amorous, self-sufficiency. The thimble here is a chastening tool: a symbol of containment, guardedness, propriety, and caution. On the one hand, it is the symbolic protector of a maid’s virginity, but for the married woman, a reminder of sexual fidelity in marriage. This symbolic richness explains the gifting of thimbles by lovers described, for instance, in “Dorothy and Roger” above. Not only does the object achieve the intimate aspirations of the male lover, entering pockets and bosoms, but it is a tangible reminder of the expectations of sexual restraint.

The tendency to anthropomorphize thimbles in narratives and poems of the period testifies to the significance of these objects both to the women who owned them and to the male lover who imagined himself a rival to the intimacies and affections between a woman and her thimble. Lines “Recently Delivered, Impromptu, by a Person of Quality, to his Mistress, with a Highly-Polished Woodstock Steel Thimble” (1795), begin quite conventionally with the following address to the thimble:

Obdurate circle, go! And shield from harm
 The purple stream that flows in SARAH’s arm;
 Protect the substance, cuticle we call,
 With thy “firm nerve” from punctures e’er so small[...]⁸⁰

77. William Hawkins, *The Thimble, an heroi-comical poem, in four cantos* (London, 1744), 2.

78. “Could I not Tasks less dang’rous undertake?/ Refine the Jelly, or Compose the Cake?” Hawkins, 8, 10.

79. Hawkins, 24.

80. *Oracle and Public Advertiser*, 24 October 1795, *Burney Collection*.

This lyric, like so many thimble poems, hyperbolizes and sexualizes the protective function of the thimble. While praising the thimble's capacity to protect its wearer, the speaker expresses an anxiety that the steely fabrication of the finger armour might impart some hardness to her sympathies: "Yet not a spark ill-temper'd e'er impart/ Of thy cold steely nature, to her heart."⁸¹ This concern that a woman's disposition might be hardened by the very object meant to maintain her chastity reveals, once again, the sympathetic relationship between a woman and her thimble and male anxiety about the exclusivity of this intimacy.

To date, I have been able to locate only one thimble poem definitively written by a woman. Mary Masters's poem, "A Petition to a Steel Thimble, which a Lady usually wore in her Bosom," adopts the trope of a lover's address to the thimble, but neither broaches the chastening symbolism of the thimble nor suggests the woman's relinquishing of her autonomous relationship with the object. The poem begins with the would-be lover seeking its services in promoting his own amorous advances: "Be Thou my Advocate," he asks the thimble, "and tell/ What Flames within my Bosom dwell./ Say, that my Passion is sincere,/ Say, that I beg to enter there."⁸² The proximal relationship between women and their thimbles is here made explicit as the thimble is relocated from pocket to bosom and the object quite literally becomes the bosom companion of its owner. The short poem continues with the lover attempting to strike a deal with the lady's most intimate friend, promising continuing esteem for the object and a continuing residence in "thy downy Seat," in exchange for the thimble's promotion of his suit.⁸³ The thimble here has companionate desires of its own, and the would-be lover is a rival to its affections. Interestingly, though, the lover in the poem accedes to the thimble's abiding intimacy with its female owner, and not simply to promote female industry. He aims not to replace the thimble, but to seal "A League with thy bright Metal" wherein "Gold shall yield its Fame to Steel."⁸⁴ By seeking this pact with the thimble, however playfully, this poem refuses to supplant the relationship between woman and thimble, either by

81. Ibid.

82. Mary Masters, *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1733), 65.

83. Masters, 65.

84. Ibid.

constructing it solely as a protective relationship or a sexualized one. The entreating lover advances his suit, but promises that he will remain “unenvious” of the clearly intimate relations between the woman and her thimble.⁸⁵ Although a seemingly inconsequential deal, the pact resonates more broadly with the subject of female identity. As this paper has demonstrated, the eighteenth-century woman’s thimble was enmeshed in a variety of ways with a woman’s past and present: its dents, bruises and scratches a tangible record of her place in the world. For Masters’s poem to suggest that this tiny token of self might not need to be replaced—but might even retain its place of privilege precisely at that moment when a woman so often exchanged her own familial identity for her husband’s—is a powerful assertion of female selfhood and its expression through the object world.

Thimbles were everywhere in the eighteenth century. And, certainly, with so many in circulation, it is unlikely that every thimble was sacred or special. Miss Careless, in *The Silver Thimble*, admits to losing at least a half dozen thimbles in the space of just one year.⁸⁶ That said, for every Miss Careless there was a woman for whom this seemingly trivial object was saturated with sentiment, memory, and kinship. These were objects that travelled with women—from maidenhood to marriage—signaling who they were, where they came from, and how they made their way in the world. On occasion, the thimble could participate in grand gestures: British newspapers of the late 1780s reported widely on the patriotism of women and girls who surrendered their silver thimbles to mitigate the French financial crisis.⁸⁷ More often, thimbles were implicated in smaller gestures and quieter lives. I began this paper by exploring what a rusty thimble in the pocket of a dead woman might have meant. On the one hand, it must have appeared to readers as a sure sign of abject poverty. One wonders, though, whether economics tells the whole story of this particular thimble. In recovering the material history of the common women’s thimble, this paper has demonstrated the interconnectedness of sentimental concerns to the practices of circulation and ownership. While a broad understand-

85. Ibid.

86. *The Silver Thimble*, 11.

87. E.g. see *General Evening Post*, 28 November–1 December 1789, *Burney Collection*. A similar call for thimbles and bodkins was made by ministers during the Commonwealth, see Holmes, 38.

ing of the use, gifting, and guardianship of these small items can help us better know how women generally interacted with these objects, the close ties of the thimble with identity, individuality, and affect mean that individual specimens resist strict categorizations. In the case of that rusty thimble, I would submit, it is this singularity that lends the casualty notice its poignancy, signaling at once the unsettling normality of poverty and the tragedy of an individual life.